

The Roles of State Parks, Volunteers and Associations

Interpretation and Education Division

Volunteers and nonprofit organizations have been an integral part of the California State Parks since its inception. During the early 1970's, the state parks began to more formally rely on volunteers and nonprofit organizations for assistance with field operations, especially in the areas of interpretation and education. The current Volunteers In Parks Program and the Cooperating Associations Program are the result of those early beginnings. As these programs evolved, the role of each entity sometimes became blurred. The purpose, operation, and communications within the Volunteers in Parks Program, the Cooperating Associations Program, and within the department are all different. The purpose of this article is to help clarify those distinctions.

Today, most parks typically have a Volunteers In Parks Program and a Cooperating Associations Program. These programs are designed to be two separate, but related entities.

Volunteers In Park Program Purpose

The purpose of the Volunteers In Parks Program is to augment paid park staff with volunteers that perform services that otherwise could not be provided. Just like employees, all State Park (Park) volunteers perform their duties under the direction and control of California State Parks. All park programs in a district, including the interpretive and volunteer programs are the responsibility of the district superintendent.

Volunteers In Parks Program Operations

The **Volunteers In Parks Program** involves many volunteers, and provides support staff to California State Parks personnel within 4 major categories:

Administration, Interpretation, Park Operations, and Facilities/Grounds Maintenance.

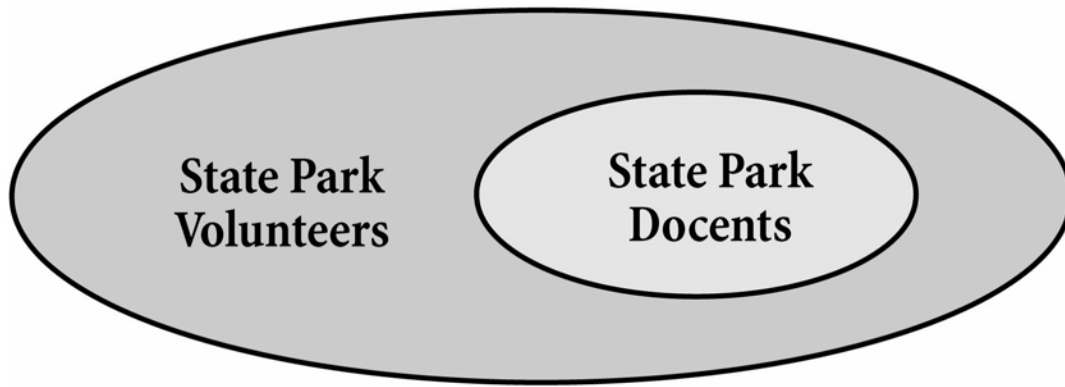
Administration volunteers assist with many behind the scenes duties such as cataloging, audiovisual, programming and research, clerical assistance, typing, processing reservations, etc.

Interpretation volunteers are normally docents who are highly trained volunteers that interpret the cultural, natural and recreational resources of the park and spend a good portion of time in the public eye.

Park Operation volunteers assist with campground and day use operations and may even help patrol the parks. Typically these people include campground and maintenance hosts and mounted assistance unit volunteers.

Facilities/Grounds Maintenance volunteers are often involved with specific maintenance duties or skilled trades such as carpentry, plumbing, painting, landscaping, etc.

Volunteers who are trained by California State Parks to provide interpretive services are considered docents. Docents comprise the largest number of Park volunteers. As mentioned above many Park volunteers perform a variety of duties without attending "docent" training. Thus, as illustrated on the next page all "docents" are Park volunteers, but not all Park volunteers are docents.



Long-term volunteers must have a current Volunteer Service Agreement and position description on file with the Park office. Each description includes the title, goal, qualifications, responsibilities, training, time commitment, benefits, and lead person. Short-term volunteers perform the same duties but are limited to working 3 consecutive days or less on special projects.

Volunteers In Parks Program Communications

Park paid staff (frequently a ranger or a Park Interpretive Specialist) coordinates Park volunteers. Communications flow between the district superintendent and volunteers through the park volunteer coordinator.

District Superintendent \longleftrightarrow Park Volunteer Coordinator \longleftrightarrow Park Volunteers

Cooperating Association Purpose

The cooperating association is a nonprofit charitable organization helping to support the interpretive and educational activities of one or more park units. Through financial support the cooperating association helps Park staff provide interpretive and educational services that would not otherwise be available.

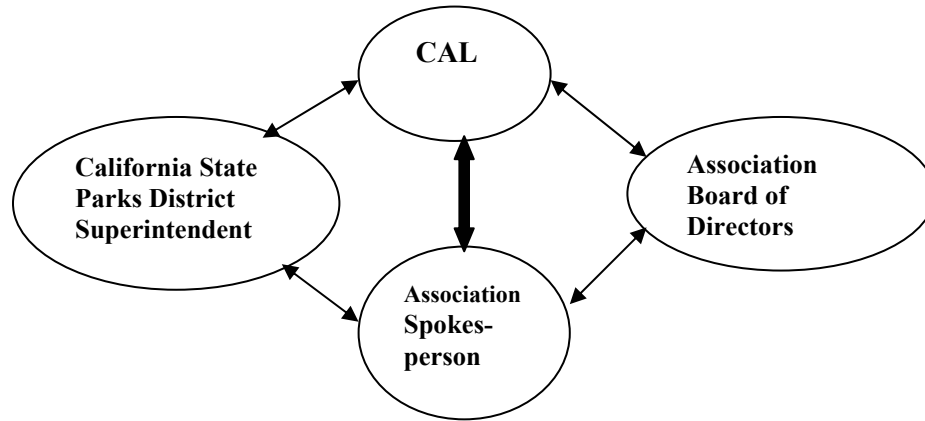
Cooperating Association Operations

The cooperating associations carry out their purpose primarily by providing educational and interpretive merchandise to the specific California State Parks units for resale in Park visitor information facilities. Associations also raise money, seek grants and attract cash donations and in-kind contributions of goods and services, and sell memberships. The bulk of most associations' income comes from a special sales relationship with state parks authorized pursuant to PRC 513. The superintendent is responsible for monitoring and overseeing cooperating association activities as they relate to department policy and how they affect state park interpretive operations and public image. All cooperating association activities are completed pursuant to the mutually agreed terms of a written contract with the department.

District superintendents are responsible and accountable for all programs and activities in their district, including interpretation, resource management and volunteer management. Both the department and cooperating association strive to ensure that their relationship is consistent with state law and policy. The department and the cooperating association must maintain a distinct separation to not manage or operate each other's activities.

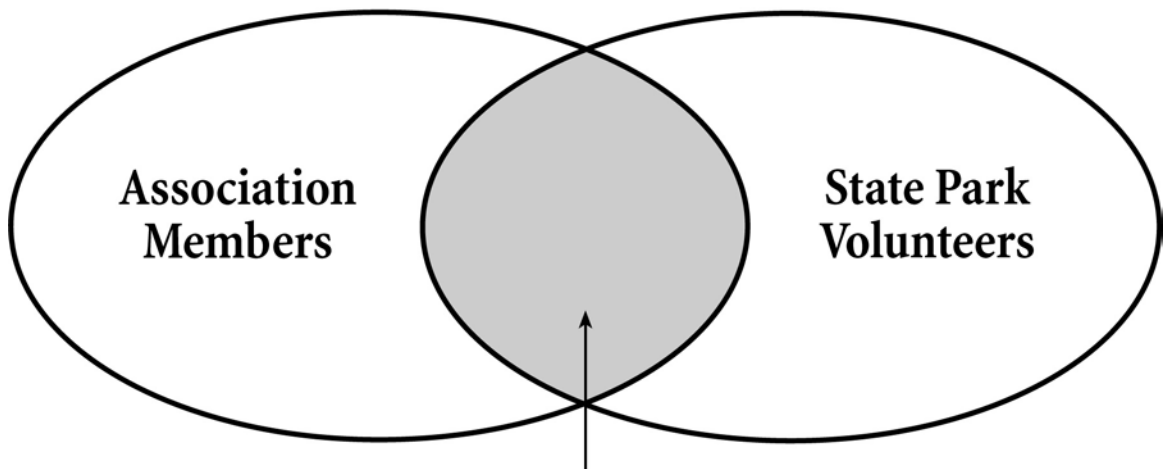
Cooperating Association Communications

California State Parks and the cooperating association each designate a contact person to act as a primary liaison to the other. The district superintendent appoints the Park's **Cooperating Association Liaison (CAL)**. The cooperating association board appoints a person to be their cooperating association spokesperson to California State Parks (normally this is the President or the Executive Director). The figure below illustrates this relationship.



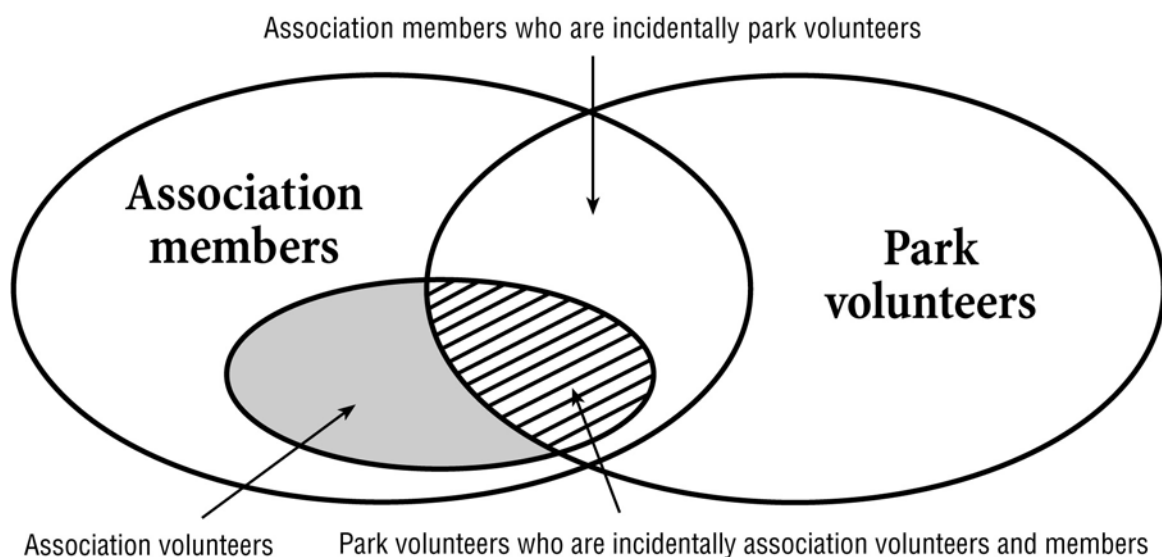
Putting it into Practice

Many people, especially volunteers, fulfill more than one role. These dual roles may spark confusion. Some Park volunteers are also cooperating association members, cooperating association directors, committee members, and/or board members.



State Park volunteers who are incidentally association members, volunteers and/or officers.

So what is the difference between a cooperating association member, cooperating association volunteer and a California State Parks volunteer? The figure below illustrates five different scenarios.



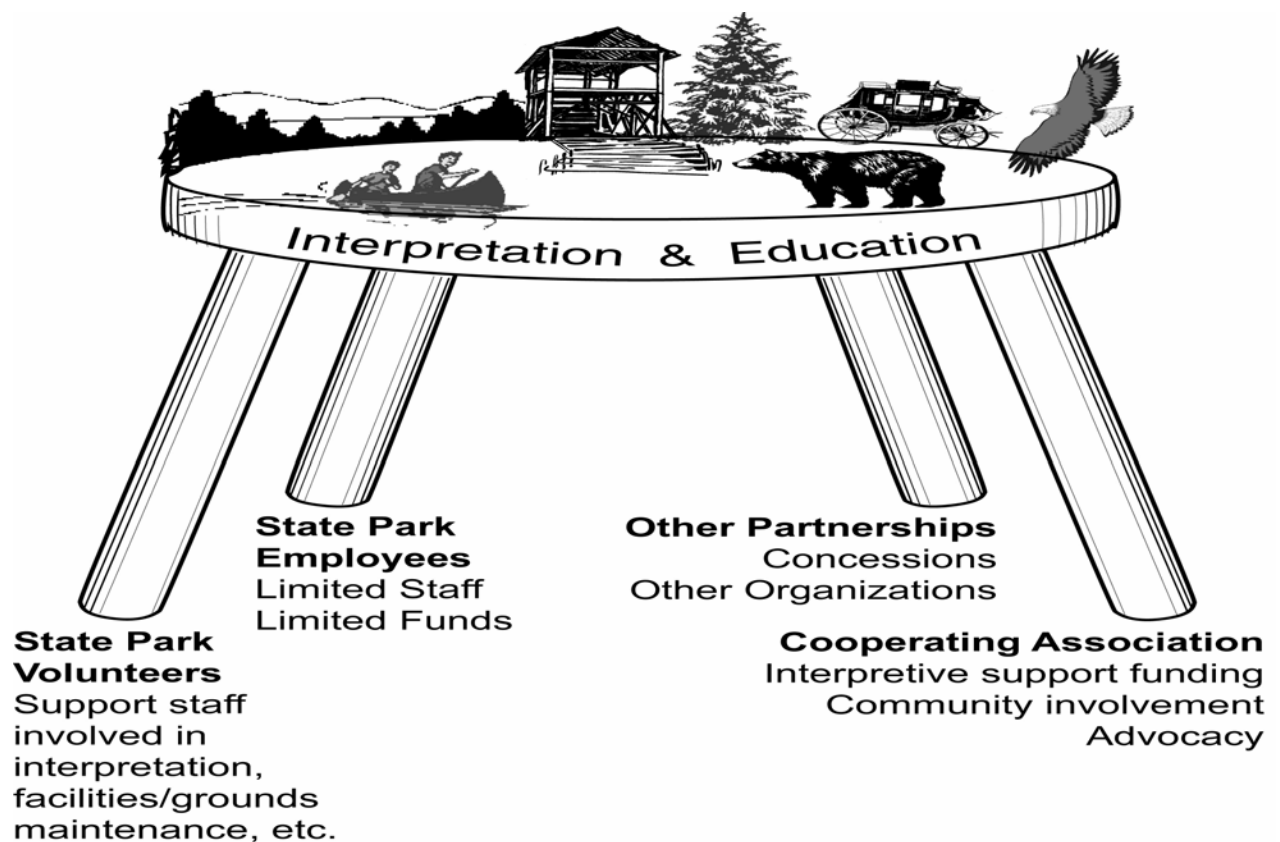
The cooperating association may have volunteers to assist in the daily business of association operations or to perform other tasks as required. These people include the directors, committee chairs, and members designated by the board. When a volunteer is assisting the cooperating association as an association volunteer, it must be understood that the volunteer is, at that time, not a volunteer for the state but a volunteer for the cooperating association.

Department volunteers typically include docents, tour guides, sales counter and other volunteers authorized by the district superintendent. These volunteers perform park operational functions authorized and designated by the district superintendent through the Volunteers in Parks Program. These volunteers may or may not also be members of the cooperating association and may or may not be a cooperating association volunteer.

Individuals volunteering to California State Parks are **not** required to obtain or hold membership with a cooperating association. However, individual California State Parks staff and volunteers are encouraged to join and support cooperating associations.

Understanding the roles of California State Parks, Park volunteers and the cooperating association is an important key to success. All three entities need to work together as a team and not lose sight of our common goal: to fulfill the mission of the State Park System. This relationship is similar to a four-legged stool. The park and the resources it contains represent the top of the stool. Four separate, but very important legs are required to keep the stool upright--the Park volunteers, the Park staff, the cooperating association, and other organizations. For interpretation and education to effectively take place all legs need to be present and functioning. By working together, the four entities make interpretation and education possible, which in turn supports the natural, cultural and recreational resources of the Park and the mission of California State Parks. Also note that the general public wants access to the park resources. Through interpretation visitors have opportunities to learn about and appreciate the value of the park's resources. From a visitor's perspective, how this is done and by

whom is generally not a major concern. The important issue is that the job gets done. Just as all the legs work together to support Park resources and interpretation, all legs benefit when the resources are actively supported.



This four-legged stool illustrates that California State Parks staff, volunteers, associations, and others all provide vital support for the programs and efforts that interpret natural and cultural resources to park visitors. Some of these other entities include the California State Parks Foundation, Save the Redwoods League, the Nature Conservancy, other nonprofit organizations, and concessions. Unlike cooperating associations, the focus of these other groups is not primarily interpretation. Their primary focus may be land acquisition, advocacy, or something else with interpretation secondary. As shown, the four groups share interrelated and interdependent relationships that enable quality educational and interpretive park programs to occur. The informal “interrelationships” between cooperating associations, California State Parks, volunteers, and other organizations may make describing this relationship challenging, but not impossible.

Understanding the roles and relationships between our separate but related entities is important. If you have questions, ask your CAL or Volunteer Coordinator. The Volunteers in Parks Program Guidelines (revised 2001) and the Cooperating Associations Program Manual (1992) are also good sources of information.

The original work this article is based on was by Supervising Ranger Jeff Herman and published in the Empire Mine Park Association's newsletter to help park staff, association members, and volunteers better understand their roles and relationships. The Interpretation and Education Division adapted his article for statewide use.

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